

Accommodations and interventions: What exactly are they and how can they help students?

Accommodations and interventions are integral aspects of tailoring learning to students' individual needs and abilities. However, in order to properly implement these strategies in any classroom setting, it is important to understand what they are and how they differ from each other. While accommodations are helpful in increasing student success, implementing interventions to determine whether the child has the ability to be successful if given appropriate, targeted remediation is required. Therefore, if students do not respond to interventions, it provides good evidence to support a full psycho-educational evaluation, which may lead to special education services.

According to the National Center on Response to Intervention (2011), accommodations are changes in instruction that enable children to demonstrate their abilities in the classroom or assessment/testing setting. Accommodations are designed to provide equity, not advantage, for children with disabilities. Accommodations might include assistive technology as well as alterations to presentation (e.g., instructions are written on the board in addition to being given orally), response, scheduling, and/or setting. When used appropriately, accommodations reduce or even eliminate the effects of a child's disability, but do not reduce or lower the standards or expectations for content. Appropriate accommodations for assessments do not invalidate assessment results. Many good teachers provide accommodations without even realizing it!

Interventions, on the other hand, are specific, targeted strategies that are implemented to help the student overcome academic or behavioral difficulties (Rathvon, 1999). One of the main problems in understanding what exactly is an intervention, is that the definition of an intervention depends where you are looking and who you are listening to. The federal government's definition is often different from states' definitions, and states' definitions are often different from individual school districts' definitions. The State of Arizona defines interventions and the process of using interventions as, "a systematic and data-based method for identifying, defining, and resolving students' academic and/or behavioral difficulties" (Arizona Department of Education, 2011). Despite differences in how interventions are defined, important commonalities across all the definitions are 1 - that interventions should be researched based (i.e., have been demonstrated by scientific research to improve student outcomes) and 2 – that interventions should be implemented, with fidelity (that is as written), for approximately 4-6 weeks. It is important that interventions be implemented for an adequate period of time in order to obtain the amount of data needed to properly determine if progress has been made. (Seligman, 1998; Rathvon, 1999).

There are 3 general areas in which accommodations and interventions are typically applied: proactively (i.e., addressing potential difficulties regarding academics and behaviors prior to them occurring), academically, and behaviorally/socially. The following are only a few examples of accommodations and interventions in these three areas, as there are hundreds of research based methods that have been shown to be helpful within the educational environment.

Proactive accommodations and interventions refer to strategies that promote high levels of academic engagement and prevent disruptive behavior.

The following are accommodations to maintain academic engagement and appropriate classroom behaviors:

- **Providing individual schedules and frequent reminders** (e.g., "we are transitioning to math in 10 minutes, 5 minutes, 1 minute")
 - o Individual student schedules and frequent reminders allow students to monitor their work pace and mentally prepare themselves to change topics, which can be a very difficult task for many students.
- **Checking in at set intervals to reinforce positive behavior**
 - o Checking in with behaviorally challenging students lets them know that you are monitoring them and that you appreciate and will reward them when they are observed behaving appropriately.
- **Shortening assignments**

- Shortening assignments for students who work at a slower pace allows them to access the same curriculum as their peers and removes the pressure of having to finish so much work during a short time period.

The following are interventions to maintain academic engagement and appropriate classroom behaviors:

- **“Beat the Buzzer”**

- In this system, children are shown a timer and given reinforcement if they complete the task before the timer goes off. This intervention has shown to be effective in helping with habitually late children, reinforce quick classroom clean-up times, and reduce dawdling during transition periods by creating a game-like environment with mundane, essential tasks (Rathvon, 1999, p. 80).

- **Coupon system**

- Students' inappropriate requests for help can disrupt instruction and reduce the whole class' opportunity for learning. This intervention uses a response cost token system to encourage independent effort and reduce unnecessary requests for help. It also reinforces peer-monitoring because the students are placed in teams that work together to earn coupons and thus, the reward. In this system, students are divided into teams who then elects a “captain.” The team captain is given a pre-determined (by the teacher) number of strips of paper. The teams should be given one more strip than the number of acceptable requests for teacher help (i.e., There are 5 students in the group and they are each permitted one request for help; therefore, there should be 6 strips of paper). Each strip represents a coupon that can be traded in for a prize or reward. Each time a student asks for assistance, after the teacher has determined that they do understand what is being asked of them, one coupon is removed. Students do not lose coupons if they ask their team members questions in an appropriate manner. At the end of the period, team captains count up the remaining coupons to be redeemed for the reinforcer. (Rathvon, 1999, p. 88).

- **Checking stations**

- This system teaches students to correct their own mistakes by using teacher-made answer keys and a designated “checking station,” thereby reducing the amount of paperwork the teacher needs to grade and also reducing student “down time” (Rathvon, 1999, p. 86). It also provides students with immediate feedback about their performance, which not only enhances learning but also prevents the same mistake from occurring over and over again.

Academic accommodations and interventions include strategies that target academic content areas of difficulty for students.

The following are accommodations to promote student learning and academic engagement:

- **Reducing the number of spelling words**

- Giving the student a limited number of spelling words reduces the student's level of frustration and still gives them adequate practice to reinforce important spelling rules.

- **Providing pencil grips or computers to use during writing assignments**

- Many times students rush through writing assignments, take too long, and/or have very poor handwriting because their writing style is uncomfortable or they are so focused on perfection. Giving them a pencil grip is a low-tech way of improving the way the student holds their pencil or pen; thus, enabling them to write for longer periods of time. Additionally, many children are so focused on forming their letters perfectly that they lose track of what they should be writing about. Giving them a computer removes this focus and also helps children with spelling difficulties so they can focus on content rather than lesser important details.

- **Giving extended time on assignments**

- Students often get frustrated when they know that they have to finish an assignment within a given time period. The frustration leads them to rush through the assignment and make careless errors. When the student knows that they can take their time, they can slow down and spend more time thinking about what they are doing and are less likely to make careless mistakes.

The following are interventions to promote student learning and academic engagement:

- **Story retelling**
 - o Verbal rehearsal improves memory and recall of what has been read; however, students are often provided with few opportunities to practice organizing and retelling information. In this strategy, students verbally rehearse important story information by retelling a story to partners, using outlines. Requiring readers to relate the parts of the story to each other and to their own experiential backgrounds improves both reading comprehension and recall of story information (Rathvon, 1999, p. 183).
- **“Stop the Clock”**
 - o Maintaining an orderly classroom during small group instruction is a constant classroom management problem. This system uses teacher feedback combined with a group free-time incentive to improve on-task behavior and decrease disruptions during seatwork. This system uses a visible stopwatch to record the total number of minutes that “good work” has been done. At the beginning of the period, the teacher reviews the classroom rules, tells the class that they are expected to do a certain number of minutes of “good work” (i.e., 15 minutes) during that classroom period, and has the students vote on what they would like to do during their free time. If they finish their 15 minutes of “good work” before the period is over, the remainder of the period will be free time. The teacher then starts the stopwatch. The stopwatch is stopped every time a student breaks the classroom rules. The stopwatch is restarted when the student returns to on-task behaviors. Once the 15 minutes of “good work” is completed, the class is rewarded with the activity they voted on at the beginning of the period (Rathvon, 1999, p. 133).
- **“Cover-Copy-Compare”**
 - o This intervention provides a procedure for increased opportunities to respond to mathematical material and self-evaluation of responses. It has been shown to improve accuracy and speed with basic mathematical facts. In this method, the student is given a sheet of paper with the math problems already solved on the left side, they are instructed to look at the first problem, then cover the correct problem with an index card, and to copy and solve the problem in the space on the right side of the sheet. The student then uncovers the correct answer on the left and checks his or her own work (Academic Interventions, 2011).

Behavioral and social accommodations and interventions refer to strategies that improve adherence to class and school rules and promote on task, productive behaviors.

The following are accommodations to promote pro-social school behaviors.

- **Reduce the effort**
 - o A difficult and complex task (i.e., researching and writing a term paper) can be broken down into easier-to-accomplish sub-steps for the student to complete as separate assignments. This allows the student to have multiple deadlines for smaller portions of the larger project; therefore, they do not feel overwhelmed (Behavioral interventions, 2011). Some examples of this are:
 - *Begin Challenging Homework Assignments in Class.* When assigned challenging homework, students are paired off or divided into groups and given a small amount of class time to begin the homework together, develop a plan for completing the homework, formulate questions about the homework, or engage in other activities that will create the necessary momentum to motivate students then to complete the work independently.
 - *‘Chunk’ Assignments.* The teacher breaks a larger student assignment into smaller ‘chunks’. The teacher provides the student with performance feedback and praise for each completed ‘chunk’ of assigned work (Skinner, Pappas, & Davis, 2005).
- **Provide an audience**
 - o One social context that can be extremely motivating is to have an audience that will eventually evaluate one’s creative work. Instructors can arrange for students to present their assignments or projects in front of a live audience (i.e., the whole grade level,

teachers on their prep period, parents, etc.) Knowing that other people are going to watch and judge their work may motivate the student to put more effort into their project.

- **Self-directed breaks**

- Students who frustrate easily benefit from frequent breaks to help them maintain emotional and behavioral stability. When a student knows that they can take a break from whatever task they are doing, it reduces frustrations and improves behaviors. Furthermore, it gives the student some degree of control and power in their environment, which in turn can instill responsibility and self-reliance.

The following are interventions to promote pro-social school behaviors:

- **Choice**

- Allowing the student choice in the sequence of academic tasks can increase rates of compliance and active academic engagement. The power of allowing the student to select the sequence of academic tasks appears to be in the exercise of choice, which may serve as a fundamental source of reinforcement (Kern & Clemens, 2007; p. 72).

- **“The Good Behavior Game”**

- This method uses team competition to reinforce appropriate behavior and reduce disruptive behavior. In this intervention, students are divided into teams to compete for rewards or privileges. Reinforcers (or 'rewards') often serve as the motivational 'engine' that drives successful interventions. Reward systems are usually most powerful when a student can select from a range of reward choices (i.e., a 'reward menu'). Offering students a menu of possible rewards is effective because it both gives students a meaningful choice of reinforcers and reduces the likelihood that the child will eventually tire of any specific reward (Creating reward menus that motivate, 2011)

- **Count down to free time**

- This intervention is designed to reduce off-task behavior and improve academic productivity by combining a simple response cost procedure with visual cueing. Students start out with 20 minutes of free time that is theirs if they maintain appropriate behaviors during the period. The teacher uses a flip chart counting up the amount of free time the students can earn written on it (i.e., numbers 0-20 are recorded in order on separate pieces of paper). The class starts with the maximum number of free minutes displayed on the flip chart. The teacher then tells the students s/he they will be looking around the room at regular intervals (i.e., every 2 minutes) to determine if the students are on-task or not. If the students are all on-task when the teacher looks around, the teacher leaves the flip chart alone. However, if one or more students are not working, then the teacher flips over the paper to indicate that 1 minute of free time has been lost. (Rathvon, 1999, p. 272). This intervention creates an environment of peer-reinforced behaviors in addition to a visual image of what the students are earning.

Research/resources cited in this article:

Academic interventions. (2011). Retrived from

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/academic-interventions>.

Arizona department of education. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.azed.gov/school-effectiveness/azrti/>.

Behavioral interventions. (2011). Retrived from

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions>.

Creating reward menus that motivate: Tips for teachers. (2011). Retrieved from

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/rewards/creating-reward-menus-motivate-tips-teachers>.

Florida: Response to intervention/instruction. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.florida-rti.org/>

Kern, L., & Clemens, N. H. (2007). Antecedent strategies to promote appropriate classroom behavior. *Psychology in the Schools, 44*, 65-75.

Kern, L., Mantagna, M.E., Vorndran, C.M., Bailin, D., & Hilt, A. (2001). Choice of task sequence to increase engagement and reduce problem behaviors. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 3, 3-10.

National center on response to intervention. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.rti4success.org/>

Rathvon, N. (1999). *Effective school interventions*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Ramsey, M. L., Jolivette, K., Patterson, D. P., & Kennedy, C. (2010). Using choice to increase time on-task, task-completion, and accuracy for students with emotional/behavior disorders in a residential facility. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 33(1), 1-21.

Seligman, L. (1998). *Selecting effective interventions: A comprehensive guide to treating mental disorders*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Skinner, C. H., Pappas, D. N., & Davis, K. A. (2005). Enhancing academic engagement: Providing opportunities for responding and influencing students to choose to respond. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42, 389-403.

Helpful websites and articles:

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/>

<http://www.rti4success.org/>

<http://www.rtinetwork.org/>

www.nasponline.org/resources/handouts/revisedPDFs/rtiprimer.pdf

www.loveandlogic.com/documents/classroom-interventions.pdf

<http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/accommodations>

http://a2huron.org/huron.teachers_lounge/classroom_accommodations

<http://nichcy.org/schoolage/accommodations>